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#LTHEchat

The weekly Learning and Teaching in HE chat created by the community for the community – Wednesday 8-9pm

#LTHEChat 202: Integrating flexible assessment for inclusion

Posted on [April 18, 2021](#) by [ltthechatteam](#)

Today's Host

Dr. D. Theresa Nicholson is a Reader (Higher Education and Pedagogy) in the Department of Natural Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University, and is an AdvanceHE National Teaching Fellow (2020) and HEA Principal Fellow. Theresa is best known for her passionate advocacy of inclusive learning and teaching and for driving forward the HE agenda around equality, diversity and inclusion. Theresa has pioneered many curriculum innovations and her signature pedagogy is characterised by student-centred, active, authentic learning that builds-in flexible assessment, aligning learning with students' aspirations, motivations and interests. Theresa has published on aspects of creativity and peer learning in assessment; student engagement and belonging; technology-enhanced learning; inclusive student partnership; and support for d/Deaf and disabled students. She is currently researching synergies between enquiry-based learning and global citizenship, and their potential for supporting diversity awareness and enhancing graduate outcomes. d.nicholson@mmu.ac.uk

The role of flexible assessment

Increasing societal demand for graduates with authentic, career-relevant skills and knowledge requires that learners are placed at the centre of a more personalised Higher Education experience. While much has been written about flexibility in learning and teaching and flexible pedagogies (e.g. Ryan and Tilbury 2013), flexible *assessment* is often neglected. When assessment is regarded more as a means *for* learning (Keamy *et al.* 2007) and students are given opportunities for self-direction around assessment, the potential benefits are many. They include effective learning (Jackson 1997), deep learning (Gibbs 1992), motivation and engagement (Pacharn *et al.* 2013), creativity (Nicholson 2018), autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000) and inclusion (Marriott and Lau 2008, Race 2001, Brown 2005).

What is flexible assessment?

At its most basic, flexible assessment can simply mean providing greater diversity in the methods, tasks and modes of delivery (Hyde *et al.* 2004). It may mean giving students some self-direction over the ‘mechanics’ of the assessment strategy – assignment weightings, workload, calculation of final grade, and timing, for instance (e.g. Pacharn *et al.* 2013, Rideout 2018, Marriott and Lau 2008, Cook 2001). But flexible assessment has the most positive impact on inclusion when there is student choice in the nature of assessment tasks, the format of work submitted, and the curriculum content. There are many approaches for integrating flexible assessment, but a strategy I use to good effect is the ‘portfolio of evidence’. In this, students compile evidence addressing a range of topics and presented in different formats, to demonstrate their achievement of the module learning outcomes. The portfolio is accompanied by an over-arching commentary on the evidence provided, setting it into the appropriate conceptual framework.

Challenges and concerns

Why isn’t flexible assessment employed more commonly? This is a reasonable question to pose. There may be constraints, perceived at least, around the capacity of administrative systems to handle flexibility. There are also valid concerns about equivalence and reliability in flexible assessment (Wood and Smith 1999), ensuring fairness and equity between students, implications for marking workload (Wanner and Palmer 2015), and the potential impact on power relationships between lecturers and students (Morgan and Bird 2007).

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the role of assessment is so great – in students’ motivation, study time, graduate outcomes, and curriculum design – that it must be engaging, relevant, authentic and intrinsically interesting. In this #LTHEChat it would be good to explore the benefits and challenges of flexible assessment, and in particular to consider its role in the delivery of an inclusive learner experience. It would be good if we could capture some effective examples of flexible assessment and identify solutions to any barriers to its use.

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